

Jennifer Parker is working to bridge the transformation zone

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The year Microsoft Office hit the shelves, Jennifer Parker got her first teaching job as a business teacher for a career center in Michigan. Within a few years, she was showing business educators across the state how to integrate PowerPoint into their instruction.

Then the internet made its public debut. By the mid-1990s, she had begun presenting at state education conferences on web resources and online search strategies for teachers.

Since those early days, Parker has focused her career on training fellow educators. From running technology boot camps to developing online professional learning courses, she's spent the past three decades working tirelessly to help her colleagues traverse what she calls the "transformation zone."

"The pendulum has definitely swung. We've moved away from technology basics to a job-embedded integration model, and not all of our K-12 educators are prepared for that transformation," says the co-creator of 21things Project, a suite of websites that connects educators to free technology tools and tutorials.

“There are teachers in the trenches who are still struggling with knowledge of technology basics, and they’re expected to adjust to this new role of job-embedded technology magic. It’s the expectation nowadays that teachers be tech-savvy, that they log into student information systems, use data warehouses, use online formative assessments and administer online tests. But many in the trenches do not have those skills – not just veterans, but new teachers.

“We’re trying to bridge that transformation zone.”

It’s an enormous task, especially when you consider that some teacher preparation programs require just a single edtech class. But Parker doesn’t flinch from the challenge. Hired right out of her student teaching gig before she even graduated from college, she’s worked in four different counties in Michigan as a district instructional technology and media specialist, a director of secondary media and technology and, currently, an interactive learning/school improvement and data consultant for Macomb Intermediate School District – all while earning two master’s degrees and a Ph.D. in education.

She has also served on state advisory committees, coordinated professional learning for Michigan’s education data portal and co-chaired the Michigan Digital Learning Conference. She’s helped refresh both the ISTE Standards and the Michigan Department of Education Technology Standards, presented countless conference sessions, taught dozens of IT courses and run a blended learning academy for teachers in her district.

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

In 2008, after developing a host of courses and training sessions, she and a group of colleagues decided to start putting their professional learning online so teachers everywhere could access it. They created [21thingsforteachers](#), a website packed with free tools, tutorials and instructional strategies to help teachers build technology skills. The website not only earned two ISTE Seals of Alignment, but it became so popular it outgrew its name and spawned several sister sites.

“We’re trying to help teachers understand the basics they should know and be able to do. Then we try and get them to a more integrated approach –not just expecting kids to use Microsoft Word but taking it to the next level and inviting collaboration, inviting kids to personalize their learning experience by choosing from a buffet of tools,” says Parker, whose dedication has earned her a 2019 DENny Award from Discovery Education as well as the ISTE 2018 Outstanding Leader Award.

“Instead of telling students to double-space their Word doc, tell them, ‘I want to know what you know about the Civil War,’ and let them choose how. It could be a presentation, a multi-media project, a short film, a makerspace activity. ‘You use the tools at your fingertips to show me you know what the topic is about.’ ”

Although her passion for digital age learning is palpable, Parker admits she fell into it by accident. Fascinated by the study of rocks, she initially planned to go to law school, move to Texas and negotiate contracts for the oil industry. It was her father who suggested getting her teaching credentials just in case her geology career didn't pan out. Before she knew it, she was taking business education classes, working with computers and feeling like she'd come home.

Now that her own three kids are grown, Parker has even more time to dedicate to her mission. Although she just celebrated her 30th anniversary as an educator, she has no intention of slowing down.

"I've got 30 more in me. What keeps me going is enthusiasm," she says. "People say I'm the Energizer Bunny. I don't sleep a lot, but I always try to come to the table with fresh ideas. I want people to be as excited about this transformation as possible."

Nicole Krueger is a freelance writer and journalist with a passion for finding out what makes learners tick.

(Photos by Matthew La Vere.)